

Last night I dreamt I was at Shila's again.

From the marble archway I traced familiar steps to find her where I knew she'd be.
One hand on piano, the other holding champagne, she turned her eyes on me and smiled.

Rose lips shining amongst the sea of swirling faces, silk gowns and spirited laughter.
"Darling," she sang. "So glad you've come. Have you met Antoine here? He's simply divine.
A count or so he claims." As I turned in greeting, I felt her warmth wash over me.
She was glad to see me. I was glad to be home.

When I woke, I could still smell the flowers she kept in every room and inhaled her memory.
How she drew us to her. A fire that would attract connoisseurs of all things exotic, she had a
glow that would charm and a heat that would keep you close.

We all danced to her rhythm. The artists. The writers. The lovers. The rebels.
How headstrong we thought we were. How original. But really, we were all there for Shila.
Culled for her personal collection.

She loved our talents even before we fully recognized them in ourselves. Near dawn I rose
and pulled the book she had given me from the shelf. "It will be your next favorite,"
she declared grandly.

In the front cover was the inscription, "Dearest Shila, you are the muse of my every
adventure." I smiled, remembering the countless gifts she would pass on from old lovers or
recently departed guests.

She used to say, "Greatness is not what you have. It's what you give. It's what you leave behind."

Youth is a funny thing. We were so proud. So determined to be interesting. To forge our
own path separate from the ties of blood and family. Yet all of us would gather in Shila's
dimly lit salon or rooftop terrace seeking bonds of fraternity and
intimacy.

Together we fashioned histories. We spun wild tales. We explored fantasies.
We told lies and our deepest truths. We laughed and cried and fought bitterly
and then drank to each other's health and made love on fine cotton sheets. We were
alive. But we were passing through.

Shila. Shila was immortal.

She would listen to our tales with that hand on her hip and that half smile on her
face and say, "oh that reminds me of the time...." and into her history we would fall.

How one so light of foot could hold such presence, I will never know.
To this day I have no idea how old she was. Shila was timeless. Beautiful and pure,
yet ancient and accomplished.

Always barefoot, with long brown hair, she would dance from room to room as if
holding court. Greeting each as an old friend, even if it was our first acquaintance.
She knew how we took our whiskey, could serve our favorite meal, and was
masterful at guiding conversation between guests who barely spoke a common
tongue. "I run an open house," she would say. "For my dearest friends."

I slid the book back on the shelf. Greatness is not what you have, it's what you give.
It's what you leave behind.

Part of me never left Shila's. Inside those walls tumbles the echo of the love I gave
and the life we all had there, together.

Can others feel it? Soft ripples, subtly influencing the mood of those passing
through? Encouraging them to laugh a little louder and kiss a little deeper? But Shila,
Shila would never be confined to a mere ripple.

I can't imagine her anywhere else but there, with one hand on piano, the other
holding champagne, singing "Darling, I'm so glad you've come."